

Bent, Not Broken

by NothingImpossible

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Summary: He looks around as he sits, trying to figure out where he is. He's in a cell of some kind, that much is abundantly clear. They all look the same in his experience - small, empty, bars across one side, though the actual details vary from each imprisonment he's had the pleasure of serving in his centuries. Killian meets Hades in the Underworld just after his death. Canon speculation.

## 1. Knock Me Down

**\*\*A/N: \*\*\*\*This fic contains graphic depictions of violence, torture - both physical and psychological, lots of blood, and more violence. You have been warned.\*\***

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><p><span>Chapter One: Knock Me Down<span>

He wakes on smooth stone, cool under his cheek, replacing the sensation of tears and golden hair spread across his skin, the last memory he has of life.

He looks around as he sits, trying to figure out where he is. He's in a cell of some kind, that much is abundantly clear. They all look the same in his experience - small, empty, bars across one side, though the actual details vary from each imprisonment he's had the pleasure of serving in his centuries.

All the memories from his death assault him at once just them, the vivid pictures flashing suddenly behind his eyes.

\_the marks on her family's wrists, condemning them to death\_

\_her face, Nimue choking the life that can't be stolen\_  
\_gathering the darkness and handing her the sword\_  
\_preparing himself for the bite of it, the pain much worse than  
anything he could have imagined\_  
\_her face and - oh gods - her tears\_  
\_her touch, holding him as he collapses against her\_  
\_life draining from every part of him and then gone all at  
once\_

He's gasping, the memories choking him with the intensity of it, and he wonders if a heart torn in two can be broken further.

\_Emma\_.

He thought death would be something different, something less solid than the hard floor and sharp stones against his back. Perhaps this is a stop on the way to his eternity, a place of atonement, to make up for all the wrongs he so clearly remembers, and that's just the last few days.

He asked for this, he begged her for this, his penance for a life poorly lived, but now that he's here, he's damn well not spending his death sitting still and \_waiting\_ in some brig. He stands, heading toward the door.

Whatever entity has him imprisoned has seen fit to leave him his hook but change his attire, clothing he's never worn before covering his body, though it's similar to what he has slowly gotten used to in his time with her.

\_Emma\_.

Just the thought of her leaves him reeling, and he catches himself on the bars across the entrance, leaning his forehead against the cold metal. He thought he could do this, end himself to save them all, but \_bloody hell\_, he misses her with a fierceness that burns through his dead limbs.

He takes a shaky breath, wondering for a moment why a deceased soul needs to breathe, but finding comfort in the familiarity nonetheless.

He straightens and gets to work on the door. There's no lock he can see, nothing to pick or smash with his hook, the thick bars seamlessly moulded into the carved stone at the ceiling and floor.

\_Damn\_.

But he grins anyway, remembering the words he'd told her lifetimes ago, when everything was simpler and he was less dead.

\_I love a challenge\_.

He begins to trace his way around the cell, walking slowly to examine

each stone, searching for weakness or another method of escape. He might deserve to be here, but he hates the inaction of waiting in a cell for some unknown jailor to descend at will. \_Let him come to me\_, he thinks with a smirk.

A noise behind him startles him from his circuit around the room, and he spins toward the entrance. A man stands in the doorway dressed in a suit, complete with fashionable tie and polished shoes and looking vastly out of place amid the dank decor. A larger man stands beside him - familiar, though Killian can't place from where. The bars, so solid a few minutes ago, are completely gone as if they never were.

"What the hell?" he mutters quietly.

"Howâ€¦ apt," the newcomer says with a grin, his voice clipped, elegant, refined.

"So this is hell then?" Killian asks, raising an eyebrow.

The man steps closer almost lazily, confidence oozing from his every move. "Not quite, but you're not exactly \_wrong \_either."

"I suppose I'm meant to ask who you are and then beg for mercy?" He doesn't mean for his tone to come out quite as biting as it does, but what value is there to holding his tongue here? He's dead, he deserves the right to stop playing games with monsters who claim to hold power over him. What's the worst that could happen, anyway?

"Allow me to spare you the trouble," the man replies, offering a short bow. "Hades, at your service."

\_Ah, yes\_. \_Another god. How wonderful.\_

"This is the Underworld."

Another bow from the god. "In the flesh, so to speak."

\_Enough talking\_.

"Why am I here?" Killian asks, hoping to get to the point so he can resume his escape attempt. Not that he has any idea what he's escaping \_to\_, dead and forgotten souls probably populating this land for miles around. For a moment, he allows a glimmer of hope to light in his heart, perhaps there's someone here he knows, family he's left behind all those-

He chases away the thoughts with a forceful shake of his head. Impossible. Liam wouldn't be in this state of limbo, not with the heroic life he lived. And Milahâ€¦ well, he could only hope she would have moved on long ago, finally reunited with her boy . There should be no one here for him, no one until \_she \_joins him, eventually, hopefully not for a very long while.

Regardless, the urge to flee from captivity is one not easily reasoned with, and he itches to do something, to \_move\_, despite the presence of the lord before him.

"That's complicated," Hades replies, "and on a need-to-know basis.

Let's start with a job offer, shall we?"

A \_what\_?

His confusion must show, because Hades is already answering his unasked question.

"You've been very kind to me over the years, Captain," he says as he strolls slowly around the small space. "I've had the pleasure of meeting many of the souls you've dispatched here and, I must say, I'm impressed with your stamina. You had good thing going there for a few centuries, far longer than most of the villains I've encountered, even the magical ones."

"What's your point?" Killian asks through a clenched jaw.

"Ah, direct. I love that about you." Hades grins, a frightful look, but Killian is done with fear, now. "I'd like to continue that partnership for a bit longer. See, in the end there, you kind of \_slacked off\_. Joined up with the heroes, made a turn toward the side of all that is good and, let's be honest, \_boring\_. I'll agree to send you back up there for, I don't know, a hundred more years, in exchange for triple that in souls by the term's end?"

Back up there, back to life, to \_her\_ \_ He can't control the leap of hope that starts in his heart at the thought of seeing her again, being with her, \_alive\_.

But at what cost?

He shakes his head firmly. "I'm not doing it."

Hades wags a finger at him as he approaches, his grin now leaning more toward dangerous than mirth. "I knew there was a catch with you," he says. "Defiant as always, Captain. Can't say I appreciate the attitude, but it's not altogether unexpected."

He's close, now, his face inches from Killian's as his eyes darken and the smile slips from his face.

"You have hundreds of years of experience being a pirate, and still you choose the novice career of hero, Captain," he says, his voice low and threatening. "\_No one\_ defies me, Captain. Not even a legend."

Strong hands grab his arms just above the elbows and he's pulled back with a gasp as Hades steps back, his easily confident smile back in place. \_The other man\_, he remembers wildly, struggling in the iron grip. He kicks backward, striking the other in the shin, but the tight hold on his arms doesn't weaken in the slightest. Moving fast, he snaps his head back violently, cracking the other man in the nose as stars burst painfully behind his eyes, and his arms are released. He stumbles as he steps away but doesn't fall, turning quickly to meet his attacker.

Not fast enough. The other man's fist \_slams\_ into his eye, sending him reeling backward into the wall. His vision blurs and he can almost feel the swollen beginnings of a bruise forming on the left side of his face.

Before he can recover, another beefy fist crashes into his gut, forcing out his breath as he doubles over. He staggers, the wall not enough to hold him up anymore. A knee follows the fist to his stomach and he falls to the floor, wheezing slightly. He wonders again about the nature of breathing in this realm of the dead, but he doesn't dare stop trying to pull in the air his body seems to crave.

He sees the fist coming, aimed directly at his head, and he ducks underneath it, satisfied at the sound of bone and skin against cold, hard stone as he spins away. But the large man doesn't make a sound, just pulls back his hand to try again, Killian barely able to stand as he faces him.

"I've fought ogres scarier than you," he taunts, feeling the crazed grin that creeps across his face, pulling his lips back in a snarl. "Is that the best you've got?"

The man advances, but Killian is ready, his fist hitting the other's abdomen with a force thatâ€¦ does nothing. Absolutely nothing. The large man barely slows at the punch as he swings his hand once again toward his head. Killian lashes out and grabs the other man's wrist, spinning his arm to the side as he jabs forward with his hook, slicing it across the other's chest. Blood, bright and red, springs from the fresh wound, but the man comes closer still, his huge fists aimed at his face.

He's tiring, he can feel it, he can feel the sweat on his skin along with the slow trickle of blood on his cheek from the first punch, his quickly swelling eye beginning to block all sight on that side. He's tiring, and he's dead, and he can't figure out the rules of this obvious game he's now stuck in. It's a game, it's always a game, for those with the power to abuse others. If he can just survive long enough, he might be able to determine how things work, and then attempt to undo them, as he's always done.

A mighty big 'if'.

He dodges one punch but the second catches him at a glancing blow to the jaw, and he tastes the blood slowly filling his mouth from where his teeth break the skin inside his cheek. He spits out what he can before turning back, but once again, he underestimates the large man's speed. A hand clenches around his throat, shoving him backward into the wall, the other hand joining the first as the man squeezes tighter. His hook and hand claw uselessly at the man's arms as he fights for air, it's the farthest he can reach from where he's pressed against the stone. His efforts draw blood but the tight grip doesn't waver.

He can't breathe, can't escape, he can only watch as the man lifts his knee, driving it again and again into his abdomen, his ribs screaming in agony though he cannot. He wants to shout, to yell, to release the air the other man forces with each blow to his middle, but the fingers are strong against his throat, closing off all exits for his breath. His vision begins to darken at the edges, and he's prepared to welcome the unconsciousness that's sure to come soon enough. Tears fill his eyes, not of despair, but of frustration and pain and exertion. Not that anyone there cares about the distinction, but it matters, to him.

The hands release his neck suddenly, tossing him roughly to the

floor, and he can only crouch, gasping, as the black spots in his eyes begin to fade. A foot slams into his stomach and he sprawls on his side, certain something's fractured if not outright broken as he frantically pulls in all the air he can. The large hands grab his jacket and pull him forward off the ground, one releasing to smash into his face - once, twice. At the third blow he's barely holding on to awareness anymore, his head lolling weakly. His lip is split, skin broken in other places on his face, blood trickling from his mouth, his cheek, his forehead.

"Enough."

One word from the god of the Underworld and the man releases his grip. Killian falls to the ground, his head cracking hard on the unyielding stone. His face feels puffy, distorted, his left eye swollen beyond sight, and his chest is sore and battered, each gasp for air shifting bruised ribs and muscles, his breaths coming too hard and too fast to make up for the many he's lost in the other's crushing grasp.

"I think we've overstayed our welcome for a first visit, Captain," Hades says as he kneels beside his good eye. "But rest assured we'll be back. We do have so much to talk about." He pats him on the shoulder and stands, walking to the doorway.

"Come, Claude," he says to the large man at his side. "You've done well. You can come back and play with our new toy another time."

Without another word, the two vanish, leaving Killian alone once more, the bars as solid across the former opening as if they were always there.

Claude, he thinks, trying to remember, his memories the only thing he truly has anymore. Claude—

He barks out a pained laugh, the motion jerking his bruised chest, but still he laughs. Claude, the guard he killed in Regina's castle and then carried to Wonderland all those years ago, the first step on his journey toward what he thought was revenge, toward death, but was actually toward her, the one who'd given him life after so many centuries spent merely breathing.

Emma, he thinks, and this time he smiles, his bloodied lip cracking further, fresh iron dripping into his mouth.

He can work on his escape later, once he's had a chance to rest.

With her name as a prayer on his lips, he drifts into the darkness.

## 2. Swing Left, Swing Right

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borrowing them for a bit.

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><p><span>Chapter Two: Swing Left, Swing Right<span>

He slowly blinks open his eyes, pulling hard as the left one refuses to open. For a moment, he can't remember why, can't remember what happened, and then all at once, he does - Claude, Hades, the Underworld.

\_Right\_.

He looks to the doorway, at the bars firmly in place across it, no hinges to indicate it's even meant to be a door at all. The corridor beyond it is dark, yet the cell is filled with a dim yellowish glow. The light seems to come from nowhere at all - no windows to light the room and no torches to provide firelight, and yet it's there still  
.

He's alone now, and on his back, the same position he was when he passed out who knows how long ago. His face hurts, his stomach is sore, his neck feels swollen from the larger man's crushing grip, and he can only guess at the damage he can't see, and how long it will last. \_Does one heal in the realm of the dead?\_ he wonders.

He raises his hand to touch the left side of his face, prodding gently at the bruising and lacerations that he knows are there even without his fingers' confirmation. His fingertips come away bloody.

He can lie there, he knows. He can wait for them to come to him. They will be back, they said they would and he knows it was not an idle threat. The only question is when.

He hates waiting.

"Get up, Killian," he mutters to himself, glad his voice works despite the rawness of his throat. "Get \_up\_!"

With a grunt, he manages to roll over quickly and come up onto his knees, ignoring the pain that flares as he moves. He fights to catch his breath, hand and hook bracing himself on the stone floor.

\_Damn, that hurts\_.

He looks around the small cell, eyeing the area he'd been up to when scouting for escape earlier, before being interrupted by the lord of the Underworld. "Back to work," he says, and slowly gets to his feet.

He taps the stones with his hook as he moves around the remainder of the room, his fingers prying into the corners of the smooth rocks to give a quick shake. Each brick is easily as wide as his shoulders, large enough to climb through should one be removed and passage found beyond, though none seem to be inclined to budge at first glance. The mortar lining each is thick, worn with years - perhaps centuries - but no less strong than the day it was laid.

Except one.

In the far corner, farthest from the bars, a large, oblong stone wiggles slightly at his tug. How large, how heavy, how it even moves, he doesn't know, but it's a start, it's \_something\_.

With a grin, he sinks to the floor before the stone. \_Better to start on the side furthest from the door\_, he decides, and he raises his hook to the surrounding mortar. Using his hand as a steadying leverage, he begins scraping away at the cement holding the stone in place. It's slow going, only the barest traces of dust falling away as he works, only one clear eye to help him aim the only tool he has, but it's something to \_do\_, \_instead of just waiting.

He's barely left a mark when he hears faint footsteps approaching his cell. Quickly, he wipes off his hook and brushes the small pile of dust into the shadows. He slides across the wall to the other corner, settling in as if he had been there all along.

A moment later, Hades walks in, Claude just behind him as the bars shimmer and disappear as they step through them. \_Going to have to learn that trick\_, he thinks.

"Ah, company," he says, a grin slipping into place despite the soreness of his face. "I'm afraid I'm fresh out of tea."

Hades smile matches his, but Claude is expressionless, and Killian can't help but wonder if he's even capable of feeling anything at all. The thought chills him more than it should.

"You seem rested, Captain," Hades says easily, mimicking Killian's playful tone. "Perhaps now is a good time to continue our earlier... \_discussion\_."

At that, the large, silent man steps forward, heading straight toward him. Killian can't control the flash of fear that races through him, the bruises still aching from their last "discussion", but he wills himself to be still, to see what will happen. There's a decided lack of malice in the former guard's movements and, though his expression is as blank as always, it feels less threatening than their previous encounter.

Claude bends down and Killian can't help flinching as the other man grabs handfuls of his jacket and hauls him roughly to his feet, seemingly without any effort at all. Killian grunts quietly, the movement pulling at bruises he'd managed to ignore, as he reaches up, grasping the other man's arms with his hook and his hand as he quickly gets his feet beneath him to support his own weight. He expects a blow at any moment; he carefully measures the other's stance, looking for a subtle shift in balance or hint as to where - or what - it's going to be this time.

Nothing. No sign of any impending fight.

Instead, Claude shoves him bodily against the wall before he's managed to gain his balance, the stones pressing hard at his back. In a flash, thick ropes snake from the seemingly-solid stones and wrap around him - his arms above and below the elbow, his chest, and his legs - holding him almost \_too\_ \_tightly\_ against the smooth but unyielding rock.



Despite his frailty compared to the larger man, despite his helplessness at being so thoroughly restrained, he can't help the bubbling anger that rises in his limbs just under his skin, a fierce burning of a very specific nature that he's not felt inâ€¦ well, not for quite some time.

\_Defiance\_.

Not the simple contrarian nature Hades noticed earlier, though there definitely was an element of that. No, this is the familiar fiery \_hatred\_ of being controlled, of being manipulated, of having someone hold all the cards and use them against him, something he'd experienced all too many times in his centuries of life.

He realises he has no intention of doing anything Hades asks of him, no intention of being \_used\_ as someone's pawn. Somewhere between his seated position and the vertical, tied-up one in which he now finds himself, he realises he's already made his decision.

\_No one defies me, Captain\_, Hades had threatened before.

\_No one, but me\_, he resolves.

"Rope?" Killian asks, raising an eyebrow. "God of the Underworld, and you're using simple shipping lines?"

Hades flashes him a grin. "I wanted to make sure you'd be comfortable." He steps closer, a slight bounce in his step as he approaches. The rage in Killian makes it hard to feel any semblance of fear, and he's glad. Fear makes him weak, and he needs all the strength he can manage if he's to face this mythological lord and emerge intact.

"So," Hades begins, glancing up and down Killian's restrained form, "have you considered my offer at all?"

Killian fixes a thoughtful expression on his face and shrugs - well, as much of a shrug as possible, under the circumstances. "No, can't say that I have."

The god doesn't frown, doesn't move, doesn't even breathe, and yet Killian knows, he \_knows\_, that he's starting to anger.

"It's to your benefit, Captain. You'd get to be alive again, set some kind of new record on years spent as a pirate or what have you. You'd get your ship back, maybe even with Emma-"

Sudden fury \_explodes\_ behind Killian's eyes. "You \_don't\_ get to say her name to me!" he growls, pulling against the ropes yet moving no closer. He can endure torture, he has before. He can endure pain and endless torment, but only if \_she's\_ \_allowed\_ to stay with him, even if only in his memory. He'd be damned - more literally than not, probably - if he allows anyone, even Hades himself, to tarnish those memories.

Hades lips twitch, the beginning of a grin at the corners of his mouth, and Killian feels the leaden weight of fear settling in his gut.

He's revealed too much.

"My my, Captain. Quite the temper," tsks Hades, raising his hands in mock surrender. "I'll refrain from mentioning your... former lover, if that makes you happy." Killian bites back the rest of his anger, holding onto it and allowing to coat the fear that crept in unbidden, clenching his jaw tightly as he flashes his eye furiously at the other man. "But, you have to admit, it's a pretty great arrangement, for both of us."

Killian swallows hard, the remains of his rage seething just below the surface, but he can't risk another outburst. He has no idea why he's really here. Surely the god of the Underworld doesn't really need him to collect more souls - villains of all kinds are no doubt already bringing in the spoils of the wars they wage on their hapless victims. But he'll play the game for now, belligerent pirate to master of this realm, if only to determine the true endgame.

"I'm not doing it," he says, repeating his words from before.

Hades narrows his eyes at him, studying him for a moment.

"Are you trying to anger me, Captain?" he asks. "Because, let me assure you, you do not want to see me angry."

He should be afraid. Every sensible part of him screams at him to be afraid, of this magic-wielding literal god. And yet, all Killian feels is the barely-contained anger he's managed to drown beneath the strength of practised defiance.

"I've crossed a lot of people over the years," he says evenly. "You're hardly the first."

A wide grin stretches across the god's face, but Killian can see the threat behind the smile.

"Ah, but I can guarantee you, I will be the last."

With one swift move, Hades reaches out and grabs onto the hook attached to Killian's arm, twisting it deftly until it detaches with a click. He raises it in front of his eyes, allowing the silver to shine in the low light permeating the room.

"Still keeping it sharp, eh?" he says appreciatively. "I guess it's as good a time as any to test it out."

Before Killian can react or properly prepare himself, Hades slashes the hook across his collarbone, slicing through his shirt and into the skin below. Killian closes his eyes tightly against the sharp flash of pain, grunting deeply in his throat, hot blood already spilling from the wound and down his chest. He allows himself the one noise, the only sound he'll let himself make no matter what tortures Hades comes up with.

"Yes," smiles Hades at the now-bloodied hook, "this will do quite nicely."

He leans closer to Killian, his face inches away, and says, "As I told you before, Captain. No one defies me."

Killian only grins, the pain from the fresh cut already dulling to an

aching throb in the background. "Then I guess I'll be \_your\_ first."

He doesn't see Hades hand move this time, just feels the line of fire seared into his right arm just above his elbow, another low grunt escaping his lips. The hook now drips blood, crimson droplets falling from the pointed tip as Hades holds it in front of his face.

"So flippant, Captain. It's hardly - how do you call it? ah, yes - it's hardly 'good form'."

This time, he sees it coming, he sees but he can do nothing as the cool metal plunges into his blunted forearm just above the brace, the hook slicing easily through layers of skin and muscle. He feels a scream clawing it's way up his throat, and he clenches his jaw tighter against it, forcing himself to \_breathe\_ \_through\_ his nose roughly. He's survived pain before, he can do it again. So what if there's no way of knowing how long it will last? He's dead, he can't die \_more\_. Screaming would only encourage Hades, make him think he can be broken.

And he won't break, he realises. He can't. He's got nothing left if he does. His defiance, his strength, that's all he has anymore, in this realm of eternal death, and he can't let that go, he can't lose that, too. If he breaks, then he truly \_will\_ \_be\_ dead, lost forever to the family and friends he's so recently found after \_centuries\_ \_spent\_ alone.

He's not ready to lose them all to an eternity spent in despair.

\_Especially not her\_.

Hades rips the hook from his arm, and he barely holds back the cry. But he does. And he will.

No matter what.

His entire left arm hurts, a burning agony spreading from the fresh stab wound all the way up to his shoulder, and he wonders just how deep Hades went. But he forces another grin on his face, stretched thin with pain but a smile nonetheless, and lifts his head to look his captor in the eye.

"I'm still not doing it." His voice is low, measured, steady against the storm of pain that threatens to push him over the edge. \_I won't do what you want,\_ he thinks stubbornly, \_and I won't break.\_

"Everyone breaks eventually, Captain," Hades says, the glint of anger still alight in his eyes though his words are calm and clear. For a moment, Killian fears the god can hear his thoughts, but surely he'd be much more angry if that were true.

He fights to hold the grin in place. "I'm not like everyone," he says simply.

"No," agrees Hades with a shake of his head, "no you're not. You're going to be \_fun.\_"

At the last word, Hades curls his lips into a dangerous snarl as he drives the hook deep into Killian's left shoulder. Killian's neck arches tightly against the sudden pain, his head pushing hard against the stones behind him, his eyes squeezed shut, mouth open in a silent cry of agony. All the muscles in his body tighten against the ropes as he fights to regain control, to hold back the cries that try to push forward, the bruises on his chest and stomach and face burning sharply.

But he makes no sound. Soon, the pain subsides enough to relax against his bindings, his breaths coming in uneven pants. But he's silent.

Hades waves his fingers as he steps back. "We'll see you later, Captain," he says smugly. "Hope you don't miss us \_too\_ much."

Killian doesn't say a word.

Claude follows Hades out the entrance, which solidifies into iron bars once more upon their departure, and the echo of their footsteps wanes as they disappear from view.

The ropes vanish suddenly, and he drops to his knees on the hard floor with a soft groan, his head bowed against the pain of wounds both fresh and barely healed. He can feel the blood oozing under his clothes, hot and wet on his skin, and he wonders how much he can afford to lose down here.

Slowly, he lifts his hand to his shoulder, shaking as he grasps the hook still embedded in his muscles. He twists his head to the right and bites down on the leather of his jacket, leather that's tinged with the metallic taste of his own blood, but he ignores it and bites as hard as he can. He takes a few deep breaths, as deep as he can manage without wincing even more from bruised and battered ribs, and, with a grunt, he \_yanks\_ his familiar attachment from his body. It pulls free with a sickeningly wet sound, agony \_racing\_ through him, and he's grateful for the leather that fills his mouth, blocking his held-back screams.

He falls back against the wall, releasing his bite on his jacket with a sigh. With trembling fingers, he swiftly reattaches the bloody hook to his brace, ignoring how the movement pulls at the fresh gash just above it.

For a moment, he just sits there, catching his breath and waiting for the pain to recede a bit more. For a moment, he just rests there, hoping to fall asleep as the agony throbs in time with the shadow of his heartbeat. For a moment, he almost \_does\_ \_sleep\_, feeling the blood drying slowly, stickily plastering his clothing to his skin.

But only for a moment.

"Get up, Killian," he murmurs weakly, his voice oddly hoarse despite not having raised it once during the time Hades had been there. "Get \_up\_!"

Right arm shaking slightly, he leverages off the wall, using his feet to push himself across the room to the stone he'd been working on

before. He can't lift his left arm on its own, the muscles screaming in agony, the deep punctures leaking blood down his arm. Reaching across his body, he wraps his fingers around the hook, lifting it with his hand, his face twisting in pain at the movement, but he does not stop.

Slowly, he scrapes at the mortar around the stone, concentrating too hard on what should be simple, repetitive movements. He longs to sleep, to rest, to give into weakness brought on by pain and blood loss, but he keeps going, chiselling away at the cement, the tiny flutterings of dust the only chance he has of getting out of here, eventually.

"Back to work," he mutters softly to himself.

He thinks of her as he does, reminding himself of all the times they met for the first time, a smile on his lips as he works away at the hardened rock. He can almost see her smile, the brightness in her eyes lighting up her entire face, and he's never felt such happiness in all his life. He hopes he doesn't see her again for a very long time, for her sake, but he misses her so much, his dead heart clenching painfully at the thought of spending so long without her, tears filling his eye until he almost can't see at all. But it's a different pain than the burn of his wounds, and he welcomes it, holding onto the sight of her in his memory as tightly as he can as he whispers her name to himself.

"Emma."

### 3. Weak Knees, Can't Stand

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><p><span>Chapter Three: Weak Knees, Can't Stand<span>

The heavy rhythm of footsteps pulls Killian from sleep, the cold, empty sound of neat heels on stone echoing in the small space around him. He gasps awake, his injuries roaring to life as he struggles to sit up straighter against the wall, blinking the grogginess from his one working eye.

Hades and Claude stand in front of where the bars aren't, inside his cell.

"Did you sleep well, Captain?" Hades asks with a smirk.

Killian flashes him one of his own. "Oh, wonderfully," he rasps as he coughs away the sleep from his voice. "The accommodations here are quite lovely."

"Hmm, and here I thought my decorator was just being facetious when he told me that. Shame I sent him to the fires, I suppose," Hades

shrugs, making a show of looking around the sparse cell.

Killian bites back a wince as he shifts slightly where he sits, his wounded arm throbbing sharply. The hard ground is unrelenting against his cramped legs, aching from however long he's spent curled up in the corner. He needs to stretch, he needs to walk around, he needs to get out of here.

He needs Hades to stop trying to make small talk and get it over with, whatever "it" will be this time.

"Are we going to sit around all day talking," Killian asks, "or can you just get on with it?"

"Night, actually, not that you can tell from here," the god corrects. "But sure, I suppose we can do it your way, considering you are the guest of honour." Hades nods to Claude, who steps forward heavily, his face reading nothing more than indifference as he approaches.

Killian waits, forcing himself to remain completely still, though his recent wounds scream to run, to move, to evade capture yet again, but there is nowhere else to go, not yet. He waits until Claude bends down, his huge arms reaching closer for Killian's jacket, ready to grab him and lift.

Now.

He punches upward as hard and fast as he can, slamming his fist into the larger man's chin. With a brief moment of satisfaction, he watches as Claude's head snaps up as he staggers backwards, away from the blow.

But not before the former guard lashes out a fist of his own, cracking Killian across his nose.

He reels from the punch with a quiet gasp, his head spinning to the right as his eyes water in response. He feels fresh blood running from the split skin at the bridge of his nose and he suppresses the urge to hold his face in his hand, blinking rapidly to clear his vision as Claude recovers and comes back for him.

With a heavy grunt, Killian lunges forward, pushing off the floor with his hand and foot as he kicks his left leg up and out as hard as he can toward the other man's legs, hoping to hit him in the knee, or perhaps higher, if he's lucky. Claude catches his ankle easily and yanks him forward, dragging Killian's upper body off the wall until he's flat on his back on the cold floor. The larger man doesn't let go, then. Instead, he grabs onto Killian's lower thigh with his other hand and twists sharply, bending his knee in a way it isn't meant to go.

The pain is excruciating. Killian arches wildly against the floor, trying desperately to relieve the pressure on the joint as Claude continues to turn his leg, Killian's fist opening and closing uselessly in the air, jaw clenched tightly as he struggles not to cry out from the shooting pains that manage to snake all the way up his back.

"Claude," Hades says somewhere just at the edge of hearing, and the

next moment he's lying half curled on his side, his hand reaching shakily for his hurt leg.

He wheezes for air, sprawled on the hard ground, each breath through clenched teeth as he fights to get the pain under control, to keep his gasps from sounding like the sobs they might become if he's not careful. Sensation is gone below his knee, the joint itself radiating agony with every shudder his body makes, and he can barely stand the touch of his own fingers against it.

"Tsk, tsk, Captain," Hades says as he steps toward him, tilting his head to match Killian's angle. "I know you're trying to show me that you won't give up, but I never took you for an outright \_fool\_."

Killian takes a couple of slow breaths, the air coming easier than before, and he glares up at the other man.

"I didn't do it for you," he manages to rasp between tremors.

"No, you didn't, did you," Hades grins, crouching down beside him. "You did it to prove to yourself that you \_could\_, that you still have the free will to fight against me, despite whatever cost to yourself. Am I right?"

Killian doesn't respond, he can't. He's shaking too badly, and it's not just from the pain. Hades knows what he's doing, he \_knows\_ what he's holding onto.

He forces the fear away, he forces himself to focus as best he can. No matter what Hades knows, he can't take away his choice from him, no matter what he does to him. Hades can't take his reaction, he can't take his defiance. And now, more than ever, Killian needs as much of that as he can get.

He takes a slow breath, shivering in determination as much as from agony, but he calms his terror, sends it far from where he needs to be.

"Tell me something, Captain," asks Hades, still crouched beside him. "Is it worth your life?"

The words echo around the small cell and return to his ears in a slightly different voice, real memories of a false world. \_Is she worth your life, pirate? \_

She was, then, and he is now, the fight so much more important than the outcome, the strength of his will the only thing he has left, in this realm without her.

He grins, just a slight curve of his lips, quivering slightly with the pain he's willing to endure, but it's a grin nonetheless.

"Yes, it is," he whispers hoarsely.

Hades sighs as he stands and nods to Claude, and this time Killian can't help flinching visibly as the other man grabs handfuls of his clothing and hauls him upright. He tightens his muscles against the fire that burns through his leg at the movement, struggling to put as much weight on his right foot as possible as Claude all but slams him

against the wall. The familiar ropes twist their way out of the stone and wrap around his limbs, and he nearly cries out as they snake around his injured leg, securing him tightly to the wall once more.

He's gasping again, his head hanging limply on his chest as he fights for control. He's exhausted already and Hades hasn't even begun.

He feels the god take his hook again, twist it off his arm, and he struggles to pay attention, to be prepared for each stroke and slash of the sharp metal at his skin, to be prepared to hold back, but his head is so \_heavy, \_all he wants is rest.

He watches the tip hover over his right arm, and he's grateful it's not his left, his muscles on that side still so sore. Without a word, Hades plunges the metal into his bicep and then yanks it out in the same smooth, almost elegant, motion. Without a word, he grits his teeth and takes the pain, takes it and shoves it down deep, away from where it can distract him. Again, Hades tears a new hole in leather and skin, and again, he's silent, a muted grunt deep in his chest the only response he makes with each stab of the curved attachment. The hook moves lower, to his right thigh, the thin fabric of his pants no match to the sharp metal as it rips into him, again and again, then back up to his left arm and his chest, stab and pull, in and out.

How he manages to stay silent, he's not sure, fire and ice burning through each new tear in his body, but he credits exhaustion as much as his own determination. He feels his blood running down his arm, his leg, hot and wet on cloth and skin, his awareness flowing with it as well, and he tries hard not to lose consciousness now, not until it's over.

Hades takes a step back, admiring his work, his fingers tapping against the hook in his fist.

"I must admit, I \_do\_ like the way you look now, just a little bit more broken than before."

Killian tries to catch his breath, to force sound through his throat, to respond. "I won't break," he rasps weakly, hoping to sound more confident than he feels.

A pause, and he can almost see the god choosing his next words. "That's what I've always hated about you, Captain," Hades says, his eyes narrowing to dangerous slits as he watches Killian loll against his bindings. "You're so brave, so stupidly \_courageous\_, that you think you're unbreakable."

He leans in closer, and Killian manages not to flinch, though he braces himself against pain he knows is never far. Hades reaches out and grabs Killian's left knee, digging his fingers into the muscles and bone, and the pain he thought he had finally ignored comes rushing back, blinding \_agony \_racing up and down his leg from the other man's grasp. Killian clenches his teeth down hard over a scream, but he can't control the edges of sound escaping his mouth, the panting of breath as he fights with everything he has left not to break down, not now, not ever. His neck feels as though it'll snap with the pressure as he convulses against the ropes that bind him to the wall, jaw clamped so tightly his head hurts where it's pressed



against the stone wall.

"You stood up to the Dark Ones and won," Hades continues, his voice low, tightening his grip on the wounded joint, and Killian's eyes fill with tears he desperately tries not to release. He's wheezing now, pain coating his every move, every breath, and he'd rather go without oxygen than awaken more of the torment that each rise and fall of his chest brings. "Fluke or not, that kind of strength has no place in my world, Captain. So either you can willingly choose to give up, or I'll be forced to show you just how weak you really are."

With a quick movement, Hades twists the hook into the muscle just above his knee and steps back. Killian collapses against the ropes with a groan, his strength gone, the pain fading too slowly to feel relief. His breath comes in uneven bursts, and he imagines the agony leaving his body with each force of air he pushes out, but it's not enough, the fire still burning through his leg and fresh injuries. He's aware of how closely he's the god in front of him is watching him, watching for weakness, for any signs of giving up, so he fights to fix a scowl on his face, despite his exhaustion.

"Claude, say goodbye," Hades says, stepping backward toward the opening of the cell.

The large man says nothing as he turns to follow.

Killian takes a quick breath, pulling the words easily to his mouth. "You looked better with my hook in your neck," he mutters hoarsely, softly, but clearly.

He can feel Hades glare, and he's tempted to lift his head from where it rests on his chest, tempted to make eye contact with the lord of this realm, tempted to wink at him in defiance. But he's too tired to do anything more than smirk mirthlessly.

Hades leaves without another word, the bars rematerializing over the entranceway, and he braces himself against the wall as the ropes vanish. This time, he doesn't fall, but sinks slowly to the ground, the hard stones at his back. His left leg crumples in front of him, the hook sticking out of his lower thigh, blood pooling on the ground from wounds on his legs and arms. He needs to pull it out, and he's pretty sure he won't die from blood loss, not down here. He needs it to finish his work, he remembers, as he eyes the corner where the loose stone waits.

With a soft groan, he reaches his trembling hand toward the shiny metal, fingers weak with pain and slicked with his blood already. He bites the familiar leather of his jacket, the metallic taste of blood no longer obvious amid the heavy scent of it all around him. He tightens his fingers on the hook, tightening his jaw on the leather, and breathes out slowly, shakily, as he pulls the hook from his leg in one smooth movement.

He wants to cry out, to scream, to rage against the pain of his body, he wants to, but he doesn't, swallowing his cries and screams and anger with a muffled sob as he blinks away the wetness that threatens his eyes. Not now, he thinks. Not ever.

He rests against the stones, fighting for control, searching for

anger to fuel the strength he needs to continue. He thinks of every wrong he's suffered in his life, every moment of unfairness, every slight, but it comes to him detached, as if it no longer matters and, he supposes, it probably doesn't, not anymore. He's so tired, all he wants to do is sleep, to stop fighting, he's been fighting for so long. But not at this cost, not throwing in his lot with Hades.

Not at the cost of who he is.

With another groan, he lifts his right foot up and uses it to help push his body against the wall, sliding toward the corner with the loosened stone. He nearly passes out, his twisted muscles and open wounds shifting with each movement. But he continues anyway, inching closer to the other wall, his blood leaving dark trails on the hard floor.

He reaches the corner and lays his head against the wall with a sigh, the cool stone against his swollen eye comforting and soothing. He raises his hand, the hook clenched in his bloodied fingers, and he counts the scrapes as he draws the sharpened point along the cement between the stones, small puffs of dust the only sign of progress.

One, two, three, four, five.

His hand drops to his lap, the hook still held loosely in his fist, and pants, the effort so much more than last time, but so much more important, too. He rests for a moment, then lifts his hand again.

One, two, three, four, five.

Again, his hand falls, again he fights for breath, the cold wall slowly warming the longer his face rests against it. And again, he forces his hand up.

One, two, three, four-

He doesn't reach five.

End  
file.